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ABSTRACT

The ancient Athenian "agora" functioned as a marketplace for ideas and commerce and offered an ideal place for teaching and learning. This digest suggests adapting such a model to modern needs and describes successful small schools that have done so while reducing costs. Research shows that small schools offer many advantages for learning and for supporting communities. Physical structures should promote good educational programs. Schools need to be flexible, promote personalization of learning, be adaptable to population shifts, provide opportunities for community engagement, and be efficient. Several successful and innovative small urban schools have created places that are the modern equivalent of the agora, places where students and adults can interact with the community, share resources, and learn from each other. Strategies used by communities to keep their schools small and local include sharing facilities with other schools, reconfiguring large high schools, sharing with an education partner, sharing with a noneducation partner, sharing with the community, leasing space in the community, using the small facility in new ways, leasing the whole facility, and capitalizing on the facility. (Contains 18 references) (TD)

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Back to the *Agora*: Workable Solutions for Small Urban School Facilities (ERIC Digest)

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ERIC Educational Resources Information Center
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Two preconceptions make providing facilities for small schools a challenge: that they will be more expensive per student than facilities for large schools, and that teaching and learning must occur in isolation from the community. Yet Socrates taught in the *agora*, an open market in ancient Athens, which, like the Roman *forum*, functioned as a marketplace for ideas and commerce. For students and teachers it offered an ideal place in which to learn and teach. This Digest suggests adapting such a model to meet modern needs, and shows that there are successful small schools that have already done so while reducing costs.

Several successful and innovative small urban schools (discussed below) have created places that are the modern equivalent of the agora, places where students and adults can interact with the community, share resources, and learn from each other. Such school designs can be "courageously evolutionary—not just astoundingly revolutionary" (Bergsagel, 2002, p. 1).

In a foresighted report, researchers DeArmond, Taggart, and Hill (2002, p. 5) identified five trends of education that should guide decisions about facilities: "pressure on schools to perform for all students, . . . demands for the personalization of learning, new technologies, periodic shortages of teachers, and shifts in student population and residency patterns." These pressures may require that school facilities be reconfigured in creative and innovative ways. DeArmond et al. suggest that "facilities should focus on students' learning and achievement . . . be flexible . . . be responsive . . . trade-offs and choices should be transparent . . . provisions should be driven by data, and facilities should be economically efficient" (DeArmond et al., p. 13).

How can the ideas of the ancient Greeks and modern researchers in education apply to school facilities?

- Create small schools that have greater flexibility and personalized opportunities for teaching and learning (Darling-Hammond, 2002; Lawrence et al., 2002). Small scale supports these qualities in at least two ways: (1) by aiding people in getting to know each other and in being known and (2) by offering the flexibility that will allow for changes in teaching needed to serve the largest (and most mobile) cohort of students in U.S. history (Sack, 2001, p. 15; Bergsagel, 2002, p. 2).
- Create a facility that supports the educational program and allows its occupants to focus on their primary goals of teaching and learning.
- Involve the community in open discussions of the goals and mission of the new or renovated school and plan accordingly to gain community support (U.S. Department of Education, 2000).
- Obtain as much accurate information about the condition of the facility as possible to inform decision making. Such information is not always readily available but should be sought to avoid the skewing of information to serve particular interest groups (Beaumont & Pianca, 2000).
- Plan for efficiency. The word "efficient" has grim connotations for advocates of small schools because it has often justified closing schools. New research, however, challenges "economies of scale" by showing that large schools can be inefficient and small schools efficient. Reports offering new staffing models and budgets show small schools can be cost-effective to operate (Darling-Hammond, 2002, pp. 60-64) and cost-effective to build (Lawrence et al., 2002).

Strategies

Today's teachers and students aren't likely to meet in an open market, but schools *can* take advantage of their own locale by giving students opportunities to interact with the community. Forming partnerships with the community grounds and enriches students' education (Nathan & Febey, 2001). The following paragraphs highlight strategies communities have successfully employed to keep their schools small and local.

Sharing facilities with other schools. The Julia Richman Education Center in New York City exemplifies ways in which a large facility can be converted for use by small schools. The 1923 facility was a comprehensive school of 2000 students, many of whom were failing. By the mid-1990s the Board of Education accepted a proposal from the Coalition of Essential Schools to open six small autonomous schools of choice within the space (Cook, 2000).

Reconfiguring large high schools. Creating schools within a school may not fully achieve the personalized environment of autonomous small schools (Raywid, 1999), but can be a stop-gap measure for dealing with problems of large schools. Another alternative is to reconfigure grades to PK-12, which works by drawing students from a smaller geographical area, resulting in a similar size school but with much smaller grade cohorts (Coladarci & Hancock, 2002).

Sharing with an education partner. In New York, three new specialized small high schools, each serving a maximum of 100 students, have opened in campuses of City College: Queens High School for the Sciences at York College; the High School for Math, Science, and Engineering at City College; and the High School of American Studies at Lehman College (New York City Public Schools, 2002).

Sharing the facility with noneducation partners. In the South Jamaica section of Queens, New York, a new facility will house the Police Athletic League Community Center and the High School for Law Enforcement and Public Safety (Fuchs, 2002). The Zoo School in Apple Valley, Minnesota, and The Henry Ford Academy in Dearborn, Michigan, are examples of similar partnerships.[1]

Sharing with the community. Many schools welcome use of the facility by the community, often charging for space and services. Chicago provides community services within its schools, including tutoring, job-training, arts, sports, and family therapy. Other schools house health centers and li-

braries for students and members of the community (Whalen, 2002). These models show that using the school as the center not only benefits the community, but increases the time in which the facility is used and can augment funds for its maintenance and operation (Warger, 2001).

Leasing space in the community. Schools can also lease nontraditional space for classes and programs in factories, malls, office buildings, churches, and other large structures and use community facilities such as libraries, gyms, and parks. Students in the Snowden International High School in Boston, Massachusetts, for example, use the Boston Public Library across the street, and the facilities of the YMCA located a few blocks away. Students at Cambridge Ridge and Latin, a high school on a small lot in Cambridge (MA), share a city park with local residents, which offers extensive fields and a competition-quality track.

Using the small facility in new ways. Schools can be so well integrated into the community that they use community facilities on a regular basis. For example, students at The Big Picture Company's Met Schools spend two days a week in an internship in the community, and three days a week working with their peers and an advisor at the school. Met school buildings are small in scale and reflect local architecture. In fact, they look more like homes or offices than schools, and are intended as places that will nurture relationships among students, teachers, and members of the community. The Big Picture Company "believes that the physical design of a small school shapes the reform efforts and learning that goes on within that school."[2]

Leasing the whole facility. Districts lacking funds for capital projects may find private investors for joint ventures, or to build the facility and lease it to the district. In 1997 the school district of Niagara Falls used private funds to construct a school-community facility, and the way in which it was financed is instructive (DeArmond et al., 2002, pp. 20-23).

Capitalizing on the facility. Some facilities can be leveraged to create funds for renovation or new construction projects and rental income. Many closed schools were turned into desirable residential apartments and commercial spaces. When the student population has diminished and the school facility or its site is too large, space can be leased or sold to appropriate users including condominium owners and tenants. James F. Oyster Bilingual Public Elementary Schools and Henry Adams House, a 211-unit apartment house, is a successful example of capitalizing on the land to fund a new school (National Council for Public-Private Partnerships, 2001).

To attract and retain teachers, Santa Clara School District in California invested $6 million to build 40 low-rent apartments for new teachers on land occupied by a school that was closed (Folmar, 2002, p. 1). This strategy can reduce teacher turnover and provide income for the district.

Districts might sell air rights over single-storied schools (especially when buildings are architecturally undistinguished) for construction of a new school and residential apartments on the same site. This strategy could defray initial costs and contribute to a continuous income stream.

Promoting renovation instead of new construction and locating new schools on sites already served by infrastructure or planned for growth promote investment in existing infrastructure. Maryland has been a leader in this approach. In 1991, 38% of the budget for school construction in Maryland was allocated to renovation of existing buildings, but in 2002 that percentage had risen to 79% (Noonan, personal communication, 2003).

Conclusion

Though "small is not synonymous with successful," (Darling-Hammond, 2002, p. iii) the message from education research over the past 30 years is clear: small schools offer many advantages for learning, and for supporting communities, and physical structures should promote good educational programs. Schools need to be flexible, promote personalization of learning, and be adaptable to shifts in population. School facilities also need to provide flexible and responsive environments, opportunities for community engagement, and be efficient. Some schools are meeting these challenges with facilities that are so well integrated into their communities that they function much like the *agora*.

Notes

1. See http://www.isd196.k12.mn.us/schools/ses/ and http://www.hfacademy.org/.
2. See http://www.bigpicture.org.

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